

SELECTING AND ADAPTING MATERIALS IN THE CONTEXT OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES- IS ONE TEXTBOOK ENOUGH?

Elena Spirovska Tevdovska

Language Center, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, South East European University,
Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia, Email: e.spirovska@seeu.edu.mk

Abstract. *This paper aims to analyze the process of selection, adaptation and use of teaching materials in the context of English for Academic Purposes courses (Academic English) by examining in more detail the existing teaching practices and students' attitudes towards textbooks and supplementary materials. The article attempts to answer the dilemma that EAP practitioners frequently encounter: is it more functional and appropriate to select and use only one source or one textbook rather than using a variety of selected and adapted materials? Do we need textbooks in the context of EAP courses and how do we select one? The article also examines students' attitudes and beliefs towards textbooks used in English for Academic Purposes courses, their views on other supplementary materials and their preferences regarding the type of materials. The article also suggests useful ways and criteria in the process of selecting textbooks and other materials for EAP courses.*

Key words: *English for Academic Purposes, textbook, language learning, materials*

1. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The following article attempts to describe the process of course design and materials selection and adaptation in the context of Academic English (English for Academic Purposes) courses. The courses are designed by the EAP practitioners employed in the Language Centre at South Eastern European University in Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia.

The definition (ETIC, 1975) in Jordan (1997) of English for Academic Purposes states the following: "EAP is concerned with those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems". According to this definition, English for Academic Purposes courses focus on enabling students to develop and use skills which can facilitate their learning and their study progress in an academic teaching and learning environment. According to Coffey (1984) in Jordan (1997, 4), EAP courses have two divisions: "It may be either common core or subject specific" (Coffey 1984). Furthermore, these two streams are defined and described by Blue (1988) in Jordan (1997, 4) as English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The latter refers to the language needed for particular academic subjects, such as business, economics or computer sciences, including the language structure, vocabulary and skills needed for the subjects and specific academic conventions.

According to Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002):

English for Academic Purposes refers to language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts. It means grounding instruction and understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines. This takes practitioners beyond preparing learners for study in English to developing new kinds of literacy: equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts.

The EAP courses which are part of the academic offer of the Language Centre, SEEU, belong to the group of English for General Academic Purposes. The target population of these courses are first year students whose language proficiency according to the placement test is upper intermediate or advanced. The purpose and rationale of these courses is to enable the students to apply and to use their language skills beyond the language classroom and in a broader academic setting. Therefore, the course goals and objectives include the following:

- Writing Skills: drafting and outlining, paragraph and essay writing, including persuasive writing and argumentation, comparing and contrasting, writing problem solution essays, editing and evaluating paragraphs and essays using self-check lists or rubrics.
- Reading skills: reading for gist and detail, previewing and predicting information from texts, inferring and identifying key information in the text.
- Speaking skills include preparing and delivering individual or group presentations (Power Point and poster presentations), using arguments and persuading effectively when presenting and debating and communicating individual opinion.
- Listening skills include listening and understanding lectures debates and presentations, evaluating them on the basis of the persuasiveness and effectiveness and applying the same criteria when speaking.

It can be concluded that the textbooks and materials chosen for the EAP courses should correspond to the goals and objectives of the designed course. Therefore, the materials should address the aforementioned goals and be appropriate in the terms of language level, design and appropriateness.

2. PROCESS OF MATERIALS SECTION – PUBLISHED TEXTBOOKS OR SELECTED MATERIALS FOR ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES (EAP) COURSES

We can illustrate the fact that the selection or evaluation of materials in the context of teaching EAP courses is significant with the following quote: “No textbook is likely to be perfect, of course, and practical considerations, such as cost, may have to take precedence over pedagogic merit” Robinson (1991) in Jordan (1997, 127).

There is an abundance of the materials which are available: a substantial number of published textbooks, a plethora of materials available online and a number of additional textbooks on academic reading and writing. Therefore, it is clear that the selection of a textbook, the selection of other materials and the decision which combination of both should be used is not simple and straightforward.

As mentioned before, the process of course design of EAP courses provided by the Language Center at South East European University involved materials selection and design. Swales (2009) describes the difficulties that EAP practitioners encounter in their

attempt to find suitable materials. Ellis (1997) suggests two types of empirical evaluation of language teaching materials: predictive evaluation with the purposes of deciding on the type of materials to be used and retrospective evaluation designed to examine the materials that have been used throughout the course. The difficulties in attempts and failures to find a perfect material were experienced by the author of this article, as well as the rest of the EAP practitioners in the Language Center. The models of predictive and retrospective evaluation were applied in the process of materials evaluation and selection in a form of evaluating materials before the beginning of the course based on teacher's opinions on their usefulness and students' evaluation after the course.

In the course of this process, one possible solution was to identify and select a range of different handouts or materials available online or from various textbooks and create a course reader available for teachers and students alike. In fact, this solution of selecting and adapting various materials and compiling a course reader was implemented for several semesters. The advantages of this solution were the following: the handouts were interesting and applicable, sometimes they were better suited to the course aims and objectives and it was possible to adapt them to individual groups' characteristics (weaker students for instance). In addition, a course pack/reader was more affordable than a published textbook. However, this solution had some disadvantages. It was clear that the majority of students expect a course textbook and most of them perceived a course which did not offer a textbook as somewhat irrelevant and did not take the requirements seriously. Furthermore, the majority of teachers had an impression that relying on handouts and preparing materials the entire time was too time-consuming. As a result, it was obvious that other solutions have to be provided which would include using a textbook. Jordan (1997, 127) emphasizes the subjective element when selecting a textbook:

What attracts us to a book in the first place? In practice, it might be for a number or combination of reasons: an attractive, well designed cover; the persuasive publisher's blurb; a list of contents that seems to cover everything that we want; the level seems appropriate for the students, a clearly set out text, and practice material that appears to be user-friendly; informative teacher's notes and key; a colleague recommended it; the size is convenient, the price is right; it is available; and so on.

Other authors suggest detailed checklists of criteria for evaluating textbooks. Sheldon (1988), for instance, proposes an extensive checklist which includes, among others the following criteria for textbook selection:

- Rationale-why is the textbook written?
- Availability -is it easy to obtain sample copies?
- User definition -is there a clear target population in terms of age/culture/background/language level?
- Layout and graphics -optimal mix of text/artwork/graphical material?
- Accessibility -is it clearly organized?
- Linkage -do the units and exercise connect in terms of topic/pattern/grammatical or lexical progression?
- Appropriateness -is the textbook substantial enough or interesting enough?
- Authenticity -do the tasks exploit language in a communicative or 'real-world' way?
- Guidance- is there advice for the teachers how to present the lessons in a different way?
- Overall value for the money.

The reasons listed above are precisely the reasons the EAP practitioners had in mind when a textbook for EAP courses offered at SEEU was selected. The selection process and the

choice of a textbook appeared to be very straightforward and clear at the time the textbook was selected and the course syllabus based on the textbook was written. However, using the textbook in practice revealed some difficulties. Although the textbook was appropriate in terms of rationale and authenticity, it proved to be very difficult for certain mixed abilities groups of students, among which weaker students had difficulties in completing the tasks or understanding instructions. This reflected in the anonymous course evaluation done by the students at the end of the semester. The majority of the students stated the impression that the texts were too challenging at times. In addition, a number of teachers found the reading texts too long or complex. Certain difficulties with the writing and referencing tasks were also identified. Therefore, after 2 semesters of using the textbook, it was obvious that it is not a straightforward or clear solution for the issue of materials selection.

3. RESEARCH AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

As mentioned before, this article attempts to answer the question which frequently arises when designing an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course: do we need specific materials or textbooks? Is it more suitable to select and use only one textbook or a selection of adapted materials? The article also attempts to analyze these issues from students' point of view and to have a deeper insight into student attitudes and beliefs and their preferences regarding the type of materials.

The survey used for this research was conducted among the students who attended the EAP courses offered by the Language Center. They are first year students and their age varies from 18-22. The groups consist of both male and female students of different educational background. The groups are comprised of students who study Legal Studies, Computer Sciences and Technology, Business Administration and Political Sciences. According to the placement tests, their language proficiency is upper intermediate or above. The survey was distributed to 53 students.

The purpose of the survey was to examine students attitudes towards the materials used in the EAP courses and their opinions and beliefs about language learning materials. The questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale, consisting of 11 items (statements) testing students beliefs about textbooks, supplementary materials and their preferences regarding the type of materials.

The first item was: textbooks are necessary in a language learning course. It was answered as follows: the vast majority of students (50) agreed or strongly agreed that textbooks are necessary in a language learning course. Only one student remained neutral and two of them disagreed/strongly disagreed.

The second item tested the students' beliefs about supplementary materials: I believe that handouts and other supplementary materials are useful in a language learning course. The majority of the students (45) believe that handouts are useful.

The further statements also explore students' beliefs about the materials and the choice between using a textbook only and using a course pack of selected materials. Most of the students (45) disagreed with the statement that it is possible to use only a textbook and learn a language, and 33 of the students believe that it is also impossible to learn a language by working only on materials like handouts or online resources, without a textbook. The majority of the students believe that teacher's help is necessary (43 of them agreed) and several students are neutral (5) or disagree (5). Most of the students value the impact of their classmates (38).

As far as the type of materials is concerned, the students did not give conclusive answers on some of the statements regarding the best type of materials. For instance, 14 students said that the best type of materials are visual materials, 23 opted for the reading texts and 13 for audio materials. Still, according to the majority of students' opinions, the best materials involve speaking activities such as role plays and debates. However, the materials involving writing were not equally rated, since 38 students opted to disagree or strongly disagree that they are the best.

After analyzing the results of the questionnaire, we can conclude that the students consider the textbooks to be necessary material in EAP courses, but not an exclusive material. In their opinion, a textbook can be supplemented by other handouts and online resources. Students still rely on teacher's input and to some extent they rely on their classmates input. Although visual and audio materials are perceived as equally important, speaking activities are considered very important. Perhaps due to students' dislike towards writing tasks, materials which involve writing were not evaluated in a positive manner. However, this issue should probably be addressed in terms of materials selection, so that this skill is not neglected in EAP courses.

The results are presented in the table below.

Table 1 Students' attitudes towards materials in EAP courses

	SA Strongly agree	A Agree	N Neutral	D Disagree	SD Strongly disagree
1. Textbooks are necessary in a language learning course.	26	24	1	1	1
2. I believe that handouts and other supplementary materials are useful in a language learning course.	20	25	5	2	1
3. It is possible to use a textbook only and learn a language successfully.	1	2	5	22	23
4. It is possible to use supplementary materials (handouts, on-line materials) without a textbook and learn a language successfully.	0	10	10	20	13
5. Teacher's help is necessary for me to learn a language successfully.	20	23	5	3	2
6. Working in class and with my classmates is necessary for me to learn the language successfully.	10	28	2	5	5
7. The best language learning materials are visual materials (videos, diagrams, photos, pictures).	6	18	16	10	3
8. The best language learning materials are written texts/reading comprehension texts.	1	22	10	18	2
9. The best language learning activities are role plays and conversations/ debates.	6	26	7	13	1
10. The best language learning activities involve audio materials (listening to lectures, conversations/ songs).	3	10	9	20	11
11. The best language learning materials involve writing activities (paragraph/essay writing).	2	6	7	28	10

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that the choice of materials in English for Academic Purposes courses should reflect, first of all, the course goals and objectives. Furthermore, the materials should address the goal of enabling students to participate and function in an academic environment. This means that the materials used in an EAP course should equip students to function beyond a language class and to be able to transfer skills such as stating arguments clearly, debating, writing or presenting in content areas.

The handouts and other supplementary materials, apart from focusing on these skills and being appropriate in terms of language, should be attractive in terms of visual design, available in electronic and hard copy form, easy to read and understand, as well as copy. The textbook should be appropriate in terms of language, the number of units in the textbook should correspond approximately to the number of teaching hours. The price of the textbook should be affordable. The materials should be a blend of visual and audio materials, catering to the learning styles and preferences of the students. The materials need to address the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, without overrating the importance of reading and writing, a tendency which might be perceived in EAP course design. The materials should also be selected taking into consideration the potential difficulties that a certain group of students or individual students might encounter when dealing with specific tasks, such as writing tasks (paragraph or essay writing, for instance). Therefore, it can be concluded that the best choice of materials in the context of EAP course would be a blend of materials, based on an appropriate textbook and upgraded with supplementary materials/handouts. Above all, we cannot neglect the fact, that even in an EAP course, the input of the teacher and the cooperation among the group mates is still considered to be significant. Therefore, both students and teacher can be considered as relevant for material design and selection. Above all, we need to remember that there is no such thing as a perfect textbook or material. Therefore, the materials need to be constantly upgraded, changed and adapted.

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